

FieldWork

by

Lorraine Turi

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Director of Thesis: Daniel Kariko

School of Art and Design: Photography

My work is a visual photographic exploration, which considers the migration from the field to the factory and the consequences of that shift on the American worker. Since the Industrial Revolution, large corporations have formed that monopolize industries such as farming and manufacturing. These monstrous companies have slowly conquered the American workers' ability to be self-sustaining and to compete in today's economic market. Staging my photographs in a field, I use the worker as a mechanism to contemplate the complex relationship between the individual worker and American industry in contemporary society.

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Lorraine Turi

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Lorraine Turi

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: _____
Daniel Kariko, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Angela Wells, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Gerald Weckesser, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Ron Graziani, PhD

DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN: _____
Michael Drought, MFA

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL: _____
Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

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Introduction

My research focuses on the impact of the industrial revolution and how its continued expansion affects the relationship between industry and the American worker. Particularly the effect on workers identity and value within the industrial framework. I explore how the landscape of American farming has changed regarding food production and the American worker and how that altered landscape has led to a consumer disconnect when it comes to food and manufactured products. I also examine the wage disparity produced by the control and expansion of large companies and the negative environmental impact stemming from their irresponsible practices. All these occurrences can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution as a ground zero, when the framework of capitalism was put into practice. The photographic work is a re-imagining of the historical event that dictated the direction of labor and food production in this country and how this event has affected the identity of the American worker.

CHAPTER 1: Historical Research

In the United States, the Industrial Revolution occurred between 1750 and 1850, bringing with it a transformation of technological and socioeconomic changes in industry and agriculture that continue to shape the United States today. Before the Industrial Revolution, the United States was mostly rural and communities were isolated and agriculturally self-sustaining. As the Industrial Revolution began to change American life, metropolitan cities began to form. Railroads and steam ships began to expand markets across the country and globally. (Hillstrom) In this global economy, industry and manufacturing began to be the driving force in the United States. (Brezina)

At first farmers and skilled workers were employed in the factories. They were eventually replaced by unskilled labor and children creating a large disparity between the rich and the poor. At the same time the practices used to operate the factories were damaging to the environment. (Brezina)

As farmers left their fields to work in factories, the number of farmers in America began to drastically decline. In 1820, 71.8 percent of American workers were farmers and by 1900 that percentage had dropped to 37.5. (Hillstorm) According to the USDA by 2003, the number of full time farmers in this country dropped to 0.7 percent. (Midkiff) Despite the decline in farmers because of mechanization and consolidation food production increased (AWK). By the

1950's farming gave way to a new industrial sector called agribusiness. A few large companies that control all aspects of the farming industry from the manufacturing of seeds and fertilizers to the processing of food and its distribution throughout the United States. In today's society, large agribusinesses are awarded a large share of government subsidies. These agribusiness have failed to sustain sound farming systems or to implement and use environmentally safe practices. (Hillstorm)

CHAPTER 2: The Recession

The recent recession has raised many questions. For me, one of the most important was “Where is individual identity in all of this?” Are we being herded into homogenous cul-de-sacs all shopping at the same stores across America? We have a disconnect between where our food comes from and where our clothing is made. It seems that we are all blindly consuming the same products. The Wall Street movement revealed where the wealth in this country is centralized and how few people share in it. As I began to explore further I found that the financial discrepancy started in the 1950s. The American worker’s wage has been flat for over 30 years while corporate CEO’s and company owners make record profits. As the American worker’s wages stagnate, the cost of living goes up driving workers into further debt that industries, like banks, thrive on. Workers are paid whatever the market deems their worth.

On February 12, 2013 in his Address to the Union, President Obama proposed raising the minimum wage to \$9.00 an hour. At the current minimum wage, a laborer can work 40 hours a week and only make only \$14,500 a year, which for a family with two children is below the poverty level in this country. (State of the Union) Companies like Wal-Mart suppress wages and hours so they can bring cheap products to consumers and make massive profits. A good

majority of these workers need public assistance to survive on the low wages provided by Megacorporations. The taxpayers pay for public assistance to these workers. It is irresponsible for companies such as Wal-Mart and others to take record profits, underpay workers, and expect the American public to subsidize their employee wages. Wal-Mart's 2010 revenue, surpassed the 2010 GDP (Gross Domestic Production) for the entire country of Norway—but they cannot pay livable wages to their employees. (Trivett)

A company underpaying their workers to make a profit is not a new concept. The robber barons of the 19th century, among them Andrew Carnegie, wanted to control and limit wages to make great profits. Unions struggled to get a footing but were continually busted by the industry leaders. Before the Industrial Revolution, employees had access to their employers. Businesses functioned in local markets and competition was limited to nearby communities. The Industrial Revolution changed the relationship between the worker and the owners. Layers of management grew between the worker and the owner. (Olson)

A labor union of ironworkers began in 1858 in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Later when unions merged to form Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers of the United States and by 1891 membership had grown to 25,000. In 1892 the union struck at the Carnegie Steel Works in Homestead, Pennsylvania. The Homestead Strike as it was known almost completely wiped out the union. Andrew Carnegie management hired 300 Pinkertons to suppress strikers. It became an all out war. Finally, the state militia was brought in and non-union

workers reopened the plant. Carnegie taking advantage of the broken union immediately lowered workers wages while extending the workday. (Olson)

The desire to break unions and exploit laborers for profit has been a continued battle. Today, industrialists like the Koch Brothers, through their organizations like the Americans for Prosperity Group, are able to fund anti-union candidates and through political sway, break up unions and effect politics in the United States.

CHAPTER 3: The Food Disconnect

My great grandparents owned a dairy in Philadelphia. They had some land with cows and chickens. From her double dutch door, my great grandmother would ladle milk from her cows into her customers' containers every morning; selling them milk, butter and eggs. There was no disconnect between their own labor and the products they consumed. Later like most of the independently owned dairies a large company eventually bought them out.

Today I live in a farming area that is quite different from the one my great grandparents lived in. When I moved to Snow Hill, NC to immerse myself in this work, I had expectations of old farm houses with beautiful barns and livestock grazing on lush grass in the fields. I think part of my expectation came from creative packaging and commercials done by ad agencies for food companies. My own disconnect of the reality of where food comes from was profound. What I have discovered is that the factory has invaded the field in the form of factory farming. Long silver buildings line the fields. Crammed within them are thousands of chickens, hogs and turkeys. It is inhumane and unsafe to the environment. Livestock are being kept cruelly in cramped cages; some of them are unable to move or turn around and most never see daylight. (Food Inc.) The barns are built on grids using slats along the floor to allow excrement from thousands of hogs to be drained into a cesspit. (Midkiff) Chickens are cramped

together barely able to walk since being bred to grow faster and larger. Packages of food products sold in grocery stores depict farmers growing crops and livestock in the fields in a way that is no longer true. (Food Inc.) Fast food restaurants like McDonalds have such high demands for meat and are largely responsible for the growth of the factory farm. (Food Inc.) I watch the chicken trucks go by overly packed in with chickens on their way to slaughter, piled on top of each other, their beaks and feet sticking through the holes in their cages. Sometimes one of them will fall out of the truck and will die on the side of the road, unable to walk because of their oversized bodies. In the morning along the length of my field I find and collect the feathers. Flooding in this area overflows the pits of animal waste causing it to leak into the nearby rivers and streams, killing fish and polluting water systems. As my exploration of the area expands I can't help but notice the once splendid old farmhouses sit in ruin, replaced by cheap cookie cutter doublewide trailers, fresh from the factory.

The government and the FDA (United States Food and Drug Administration) have made it very difficult for local and organic farmers to compete and thrive. Farmers are overwhelmed with an oppressive amount of paper work, fees, and regulations making it very difficult to stay in business and make a profit. Private food co-ops are being raided and shut down by Federal and State officers for participating in the production of raw milk. Rawsome Foods, an organic farm that produces organic meats and raw milk, was raided at

gun point. The children and parents were held in a room of their house for hours while, Federal and local marshals, emptied out their storage and refrigerators, confiscating close to \$40,000 worth of product and equipment. Organic meat producers are unable to slaughter their own meat and have to drive sometimes hours to an FDA approved slaughterhouse, which then ironically exposes the meat to all kinds of safety issues. (Farmaggeden) This harassment and shut down of organic and natural farms by our government deteriorates consumer choices and the opportunity of the American worker to support their own private industry.

CHAPTER 4: Genetically Modified Organisms

A large and growing part of farming includes Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). GMO's are the transferring of a gene from one species into another species. In farming seeds are being modified to prevent the destruction of crops by insects. Monsanto is the worlds largest seed company using and manufacturing genetically modified seeds. One of Monsanto's leading seed is corn. Corn is a very promiscuous organism, it will cross-pollinate with other corn corps located even miles away. Monsanto will send out investigators that test to see if it's genetically altered corn has cross-pollinated with non-GMO fields. If the investigator finds that the farmers seed has been crossed with the Monsanto seed then Monsanto will sue the farmer. Due to expensive lawsuits many local farmers are being put out of business and are no longer able to cultivate their own seed. (Food Inc.) If farmers can't use their own seed and can only use seed from a large company like Monsanto what does that do to the farmers own identity and industry? Companies that are household names like Campbell's use GMOs in their food, but since the use of labels to identify these companies have been blocked by congress consumers are unaware that they are eating GMO's. Without proper labeling the choice has already been made for the consumer by politicians and the food industry. Part of the problem is that our government continues to shoot down bills that are being brought before them that would demand products using GMOs to be labeled. Some companies are beginning to

take matters into their own hands and in 2013 the retailer Whole Foods has announced mandatory GMO labeling of all the products sold in its stores by 2018.

CHAPTER 5: Fieldwork

The field in my photographs represents the generations of farmers and workers that have physically put hand to soil in order to plant food and sustain life. The photographs are printed on paper that has been imbued with dirt from my land creating a permanent physical connection between the soil and the paper and the image. Each photograph carries the history and hand of the worker. Imbedding the paper with dirt connects the viewer, the consumer, back to the land. The photographic work reveals the past and present of the story of the worker and the land.

I use repetition to symbolize the series of motions performed daily as an integral part of factory work. Through these repetitive motions, workers have become fashioned into tools and their identities have been lost. My photographic constructions represent the one worker that the many become. As the workers become a part of the machine owners make money off of the struggle and cadence of the motions of peoples lives. In order to survive work, borrow, buy becomes the pulse of the worker.

In the photographs I am not making a historical reference to the migration, rather I am trying to re-imagine this historical event within contemporary society. Each image contains a contemporary moment. *The Seamstress* (fig.3) was realized after reading an article about piece workers (workers paid by unit production rather than hourly rate/salary) in California that earn less than minimum wage and no insurance or benefits of any kind. I chose to represent the seamstresses in historical costume using old sewing machines as way to collapse time. The women currently working in the piece factories are tied to the women that worked in the factories of the 1800s; both work long hours and make less than a living wage. Pieces of cloth cover their identity to emphasize that the identity of the worker is insignificant. Value is placed on the number of pieces a worker can produce not their overall contribution.

In 2011, Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich offered children working as janitors in their schools as a solution to poverty in the United States. I began to think of the children that were made to work in factories in the later years of the Industrial Revolution and how it would be for my eleven year old nephew to be forced to work. The thought of his childhood and potential being taken from him because of his parent's financial status enraged me. I used the image of lines of children going to work in *Factory Road* (fig.8) to convey this insane idea.

As in my investigation expanded I learned about the business practices of companies like Monsanto. I began to imagine what it would be like for the farmer

to stand up against a businessman that had come into the field. In *Last Stand* (fig.1) the businessman and the farmer are frozen in a moment that is the space before something happens. The farmer's stance represents a literal gaining back of the land. The outcome is unknown but there is the possibility for change within the moment. This connects to my own belief that our society is in a moment of evolution. We all need to make a stance.

In each construction I chose the costume specifically to invoke our own stereotypes about dress and the types of clothing representative of certain identities; for example in *Last Stand* (fig.1) the farmer is wearing overalls and the businessman is wearing a suit. Throughout the series the costumes are carefully chosen to reflect a specific archetype that the audience can identify with the work.

I consider my process to be a digital construction. I use multiple images to create an artificial reality. I will imagine an image and take photographs of each of the pieces, then construct the entire image in Photoshop. Making the work in this way gives me the opportunity to have a very specific conversation that references the disconnection to how the land and the worker are being misused. Through representation of cultural signs, I attempt to connect the viewer to the image and access the viewer's memory. In this way the viewer may relate to the piece as being familiar.

When I was constructing the photograph, *The Last Stand* (fig. 1), I had in mind the Pink Floyd album cover of *Wish You Were Here*. (fig.2) The cover shows two businessmen in a confrontation. One of the businessmen is on fire as

they shake hands. In *Last Stand* (fig. 1) the two figures are posed mirroring the stance of the two men on the cover of the album. (fig. 2) I recreated this powerful stand-off using the businessman and his swarming paper invading the farmer and his field.

In the *Seamstress* (fig. 3) I use a similar vanishing point to reference the depth in Da Vinci's, *Last Supper*.(fig. 4) and arrange the figures in a row in the foreground to mimic the way the figures are arranged in the painting. This brings to mind issues of sacrifice, the loss of the individual, and organizational control. Jeff Wall's, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* 1993 (fig.5) had a strong influence on the way that I constructed several of my images. Jeff wall used blowing paper in the photograph to show gesture and movement just as it had in the Japanese artist Hokusai's, original version, *A Sudden Gust of Wind*. (fig.6) I use blowing paper in both my images of *The Paper Pusher* (fig.7) and in *Last Stand* (fig. 1) in a similar fashion with the intention to create visual movement within the photograph and heighten the energy of the piece.

A number of contemporary artists are exploring issues of the consequences of industry on the environment and individual. The work of Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison describes alternative worlds where the everyman is charged with tending an earth that has been depleted and abused by industry. (fig.9) I also use images of the field as a pallet to show the consequences of industry. Like them, I too use a combination of straight photographs and digital manipulation to create a surreal landscape or backdrop for my narratives.

Conclusion

These images and the creative work are not offering a solution to the problems outlined above. The images are a reproduction of the social act society has followed since the Capitalist framework was constructed during the industrial revolution. It is my feeling that we made a very grave mistake when this framework was put into place. We allowed greed and consumption to guide and govern our society. As a consequence, human worth is only based on a monetary hourly figure or its consumership to large corporations. Our planet is in jeopardy and only a small population of the world is living in comfort.

It is my hope that these images may become part of a larger conversation. Through conversations and then action workers can take back control of the food and manufacturing industries that have slowly been monopolized by large companies.

Something I have learned through my investigation is that one of the ways that people have begun to do this is through the local food and local manufacturing movements. It gives me hope knowing that people are becoming increasingly aware of how their foods are being processed and exploited and they are beginning to seek out cruelty free meats and local and organic growers. It is my belief that we cannot fix the world's problems while at the same time being responsible for the suffering and cruelty to the other creatures around us. Proposing to end war and stop human suffering is a top down approach. If we

first began putting value on what we deem to be lesser creatures' lives and work to end the suffering of animals, I think then we would have respect for all life making our species more harmonious with our environment. The first thing we can do is to end factory farming.

More voices are joining the conversation regarding the veil that has separated our products from truth. Someday these voices may drown out the overbearing industry throng promising everything from healthy food to support and care for their workers. This investigation has helped me to look for a more authentic way of life. I am thinking now of my own diet, making choices that are less processed and more natural. I take more time to seek out local foods and organic foods and have begun boycotting fast food companies like McDonalds whose practice are responsible for the creation and for sustaining factory farms. I am also making different choices when it comes to the places I shop. Seeking out individual makers for house wares and clothing instead of shopping at Target and Wal-Mart. What I have realized through living in a small 650 square foot house is that I do not need a lot of space to be happy. I prefer a small house to a large house, which used to be my measure of success. I feel good that in my own way I have lightened my carbon footprint and I plan to explore ways that I can continue this trend in my own life. It is my dream that through new technologies the worker can take back industry and provide our communities with healthy sustainable alternatives. The image of a thriving main street and farmers growing their crops in the fields can be a reality and not just a picture used by large corporations to sell products in the grocery store.



Figure 1. *Last Stand*, 2013



Figure 2. Pink Floyd Album, *Wish You Were Here*, 1975



Figure 3: *The Seamstress*, 2013



Figure 4: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495-1498



Figure 5: Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* 1993



Figure 6: Katsushika Hokusai, *Yejiri Station, Province of Suruga*, ca. 1832



Figure 7: *The Paper Pushers*, 2013



Figure 8: *Factory Road*, 2013



Figure 9: Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, *Turning to Spring*, 2001

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